

LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

TO

THE ACADEMY

CONSISTING OF

NOTABLE ARTICLES, REVIEWS, Etc.,

WHICH HAVE APPEARED FROM TIME TO TIME IN "THE ACADEMY" SINCE ITS INCEPTION.

The Bad Novel

(March 2, 1901.)

A NOVEL is bad not so much because the novelist cannot say what he has to say as because he has nothing to say; but both disabilities contribute to the badness, for, by a wise ordinance of nature, he who bears a message can always, somehow, deliver it. Most often the bad novel arises from an accident. A fleeting impulse, a chance remark, even an idle hour, and lo! the bad novel is born. The prospective bad novelist thinks or hears either "How nice it would be to write a story!" or "What a splendid idea for a story!" and he answers: "Why shouldn't I try? I will." Usually, we fancy, it is the curiosity to experience what writing is like, and not the desire to embody a given idea in literary form, that makes the silly scribe, whose feeling is that it would be rather "fun" to do as Thackeray did. The splendid idea follows, forced unnaturally into existence by the piquancy of the desire. So the paper is bought, the pen dipped, and the novel begun. Now, the bad novelist is commonly a somewhat clever and versatile person, with a certain facility, and his first, if not his last, sensation is one of surprise at the easiness of writing narrative. And merely to write narrative is easy; we all do it in our letters—we write narrative "without knowing it." Indeed, anyone—a tea merchant or an engrossing clerk—could produce a novel—that is, a connected and coherent invented narrative—if he doggedly persevered; it might be inconceivably fatuous, but it would be a novel; printed, it would deceive the eye of a Ste.-Beuve at a distance of three feet. And the bad novel deceives the eye of its author, as he writes it, at a distance of a foot. It looks like a novel; it has all the customary apparatus of chapter-divisions, short lines, indented lines, inverted commas; it *is* a novel. The author is encouraged to continue; he continues and he finishes; and, once in a hundred times, by some error of destiny, the novel is published. We calculate that the bad novelists of the United Kingdom, driven by curiosity or the force of an idea, or, perhaps, by poverty, produce several hundreds of irredeemably bad novels each week; so that, though only one per cent. of them gets as far as the laughter of compositors (if

compositors ever laugh), the number reaching this office in a year is quite considerable. We will briefly examine one or two of the finest specimens, dealing first with the matter and then with the manner.

The bad novelist, instead of finding a central idea for an environment, invariably finds an environment for a central idea. With him the Idea is uppermost. His pseudo-creative impulse is not the vague resultant of long observation and an inclusive sympathy, but a precise and defined inclination to relate something unusual, bizarre or astonishing. The bad novelist has the same false notion as the crowd of amiable friends who persist in annoying the good novelist with the remark: "I have met *such* a queer man, or heard *such* a queer incident—I am sure you would be interested—it certainly ought to go into a book." He has not guessed that the aim of the novelist is to discover beauty in the normal, not to provide a literary freak-show; that, in fact, the novelist is attracted by the abnormal about as much as a painter would be attracted by a woman with twelve fingers or a beard. And so the bad novelist goes in search of, or is seized by, the startling Idea; and the more startling it is, the more pleased he is with it.

He sits down to accomplish the embodiment, and one can almost hear him inquiring, "How ought I to begin?" The obvious course is to ask, "How do other authors begin?" And this is just what he does ask, and, having ascertained the answer, begins accordingly. Observe, it never occurs to him to begin by examining life and nature anew for himself. The mere Idea has already carried him far away from all considerations of truth and probability. In the present instance he begins with the reception held to celebrate the son's majority. There is no general description of it, but a few disconnected "bits," which he has evidently remembered or excogitated one by one, and strung together. The attitude towards "society belles" is sarcastic. "The two girls squeezed our hands with the formula smile, lifted their precious silks about their legs, and squeezed into the carriage in front of the mother, whose enamelled shoulders shuddered a moment in the night air." And later on are such phrases as "veiled vulgarity," "*sous-entendu* doubly clear and disgusting to a refined creature." Such observations, as they presented themselves to him, he would certainly deem both original and effective.

We next come to the father's portrait of the mysterious damsel. The author's purpose is to make this picture impressive, and the means which he adopts are exactly those which would be used by a man ignorant both of life and art. "Unanimously pronounced by the Press as the accomplishment of the year. Such was the witchery of this famous work that little knots of fascinated picture-lovers would linger at the canvas during its tenure at [*sic*] the Academy and gaze upon it long and with swimming eyes, unconscious of the fleeting time, and marvel at the wonderful beauty of the dreams which it inspired rather than at the radiating loveliness of the picture itself." Now, if the bad novelist could have walked out of his study, had a cold plunge, gazed inimically into the mirror and said to his face: "Do people stand long rapt and with swimming eyes before pictures in the Academy?" there might have been hope for him. But of such a feat of detachment he is constitutionally incapable, and so, gaining momentum page by page, he wanders further and further away from reality. He is lost. Often you can see him puzzling where to go, what to say next, and saying the most ludicrous things in his bewilderment. As thus: "It being bad form to notice any peculiar habits or fads of one's guests, I have no very clear impression of the Lord Archibald's conduct as he left the house." Or again: "That, said as it was with a dreamy, far-away look, would have flattered some men and made them sensible of an unconquerable desire to throw their arms round her neck and embrace her, or raise her hand gently to the lips and imprint upon it a kiss full of the profoundest meaning. Such, however, was my father's training that my mind was entirely innocent of any leaning in that direction." And so the bad novel continues, at haphazard, an inconsequent farrago of conscious and unconscious imitations interspersed with original fatuities, until the last ecstasy—"Ivor, my own, my dearest love, now we shall be together always, on earth and in heaven, always, always together." The Idea is clothed.

In regard to the manner of the bad novel—by which we, of course, mean the literary manner—the commonest and most pervading characteristic of it is the tendency to write, not in words, but in phrases. As Schopenhauer said of unintelligent authors: "They combine whole phrases more than words—*phrases banales*." There is no clearly defined thought. "It is only intelligent writers who *place individual words together with a full consciousness of their use*, and select them with deliberation." The subject of *phrases banales* is much too large to be entered upon here. The habit of thinking in phrases leads, by a curious attraction, to the habit of imagining in episodes or lumps of event, instead of detail by detail. Thus, when a hero is suddenly called away on a journey, all the rigmarole of acts previously performed by other heroes so placed is set out in full. "I scribbled a few brief notes, cancelling the engagements I had contracted;" or, at the end of the journey: "I at once dismissed the driver with a fee that made his old eyes sparkle." It is the same with descriptions: they are conceived in a chunk; there is none of the

minutiae of invention, but a vague reminiscence of some remembered whole. Thus, the account of a young lady's boudoir (in a novel which opens: "Everybody knows Champington, the little town nestling in the Surrey hills") begins: "The room was tastefully and elegantly furnished in a style that signalled a woman's inspiration;" and then follows a page and a half of descriptive *clichés*; and the last phrase is: "Odour of roses and mignonette." Even there the bad novelist cannot drop his chunk of remembered episode, for on the next few pages we meet with these locutions:—

Sol shot his beams of light athwart the window.

So, at least, Sol seemed to say to Alice Lawson, a winsome . . .

"How delicious!" she cried, taking a deep inspiration of the flower-scented air.

"Heigho!"

Now, why do young girls say "Heigho!" often when they have not a trouble in the world?

Nine pages elapse before the bad novelist is able to free himself from the spell cast by the incantatory phrase, "The room was tastefully and elegantly," etc.

To conclude, the most pathetic literary shortcoming of the bad novelist is his entire inability to say what he wants to say—a shortcoming not often noticeable because he so seldom wants to say anything in particular. There are rare moments, however, when one can perceive that he really has something on his mind. To witness his struggles then is painful. The expert penman is frequently conscious of having, despite himself, written differently from his intention, of having compassed a passage, but not at all *the* passage. The bad novelist, by simple amateurishness, "never gets anywhere near" his real thoughts. He is continually stultifying and falsifying himself, posing as a bigger fool than actually he is. That is his tragedy, which he does not suspect.

Review: By William Sharp

(January 2, 1892.)

A Last Harvest. By PHILIP BOURKE MARSTON. With a Biographical Introduction by MRS. LOUISE C. MOULTON. (Elkin Matthews.)

THIS aftermath of verse comprises all the poetic work of the late Philip Bourke Marston that has appeared posthumously. It must be seven years at least since its author told the present writer the scheme of his projected "Book of Love," a collection of lyrics and sonnets which was to be his best achievement in verse, and to embody his deepest thoughts and most vivid emotions; "and yet," he added—with his sightless eyes turned towards his companion, as though no blank of darkness intervened—"to what end? Since in a few years I shall be forgotten. I do not delude myself, though I sometimes dream dreams." But it is not too much to say that Philip Marston is not forgotten, and that his best work has reached a wider public and

appealed to a greater variety of readers than he ever anticipated. Among the by no means inconsiderable body of men and women who cherish the memory of the dead poet, and find a singular pleasure in his verse, it would be natural to expect an ardent championship of the author of "Song-Tide" and "Wind-Voices." Yet he has profoundly touched many of both an older and younger generation whom he never met or heard of, and in the close on five years since his death has attained a position which has surprised some even of those who believed in him most. This, however, has probably been achieved by a few particularly lovely and pathetic lyrics and sonnets rather than by the mass of his poetic work. It is difficult to be critical when one is a partisan; but after all nothing is to be gained by an attitude which is of the heart rather than of the mind.

Marston was a poet of rare and delicate genius, often with a note so poignant and exquisite that one realises at once how, in happier circumstances, he might have won a great name and an enduring place; and all to whom his poetry appeals find in it a charm which is not to be gainsaid. To the present writer it does profoundly appeal; and it is with deep pleasure that I, for one, have watched the growth of appreciation for the work of one who was so dear a friend. Yet to me, as to some others who knew the man and admire his verse, there is something exaggerated in the claims that are sometimes advanced. I have often been taken to task for having, in a critical estimate of Marston's poetry, prefatory to a selection from his three volumes made a year or two ago, expressed a conviction that, while the quintessential part of his life-work would survive much of more popular contemporary poetry, the greater portion of it has not that intense individuality, that, inevitableness of art, by which alone immortality can be won. This conviction did not then, and does not now, involve any lack of liking for the, in the main, beautiful and pathetic verse of Philip Marston. I have no reason to modify in the least degree what I wrote: indeed, familiarity with all his work, and a recent reperusal of his poems in an order as nearly chronological as possible, confirms me in the belief that, beautiful and charming as nearly all his verse is, only a very small part of it can be expected to survive the century. The most discerning and impartial critic of his poetry was the author himself. I call to remembrance one evening in particular when, pleased by a recent success and elated by a generous letter from a great poet whom he loved, he pointed out with the most delicate literary acumen and logical argument just how and where he would of necessity fail to take that high rank to which he had once aspired. Above all, he was clear-sighted enough to recognise that he was under the shadow of Rossetti's genius, and that, therefore, his highest claim could be that he was "lieutenant to that great captain."*

It would not be fair to take this "Last Harvest" as the fulfilment of Philip Marston's carefully planned and long-brooded-over "Book of Love." At best, we have here only the more or less fragmentary parts of an

unfinished work. His editor, the loyal and affectionate friend who has done so much for the blind poet's posthumous fame, as well as for his welfare while alive, errs, it seems to me, in the inclusion of certain poems in this volume. Though Mrs. Moulton may claim with justice that she knew better than anyone else could what poems of Marston's to preserve, I cannot think that his own judgment would have passed, for example, so imitatively Rossettian a sonnet as "I thought that I was happy yesterday," with such unmistakable echoes as—

For though apart, we stood soul close to soul,
So joined by infinite Love's supreme control.

* * * *

Oh, to what awful un conjectured goal
Are our feet tending—my beloved one, say?

or that at p. 129, with its close:—

But, ah, what words sigh down these trackless ways,
What words but these: 'Too late—too late—too late'?

One or two of the poems in lyrical form, also, seem to me below the author's high level. Yet so full of charm and beauty, albeit of an intensely sad and sometimes sombre kind, is this "Last Harvest," that allusion to an alloy of somewhat inferior gold might have been omitted, but for the imprint on the title page, "Lyrics and Sonnets from the 'Book of Love.'" It is fairer to the poet to believe that some of this "last harvest" of his genius would not have been garnered by him for what was to be his crowning achievement.

Philip Marston was not only a sonneteer by nature, but wrote, while in his teens, some of his best poems in this kind. Yet out of the scores of lovely sonnets in "Song-Tide," "All in All," "Wind-Voices," and this "Last Harvest," how few are likely to be remembered! This is not merely because of the Rossettian atmosphere by which most of them are permeated, but to some extent at least on account of the monotony of sentiment and expression which characterises them. If the many almost identical facets of "All in All" were concentrated into one "dusky beam," what a superb gem of "exquisite despair" it would be. But, as it is, a certain weariness to the most sympathetic reader is almost inevitable. Marston himself was well aware of this: though, as he said with only too much justice, could one expect the varied note of joy from a life so darkened as his? The finest of his sonnets are probably better than the finest by any of his contemporaries, with the single exception of Rossetti; but their number seems to me very limited. In the present collection there is scarce one to equal, and certainly none to surpass, the best of those written in his earlier years. Among the most notable are "The Breadth and Beauty of the Spacious Night," with those grand lines—

"The sanctity of sunsets palely bright,
Autumnal woods, seen 'neath meek skies of blue,
Old cities that God's silent peace stole through—"

the beautiful and almost Elizabethan "Love Asleep," the austere "To All in Haven," the weary "Good Night and Good Morrow," and the still more pathetically personal "Spring and Despair."

* Marston's own words.

Did space permit I should quote here "At Last"; for, notwithstanding its close kinship to one of the most beautiful of Miss Christina Rossetti's flawless lyrics, it has a poignantly personal note, and, above all, was the author's "swan-song"—the dying strain in what, in his own words, may be called his "travelling twilight of sweet sound."

The biographical introduction by Mrs. Moulton is welcome, if too short; and, needless to say, it is written with utmost sympathy and delicacy. There are one or two slight misstatements of fact, but nothing that calls for actual correction save the misprint at p. 21 of "1876-7" for "1886-7." The brief memoir is enhanced by the inclusion of Mr. Swinburne's beautiful Epicede ("Light"), foremost among the many posthumous tributes to Philip Bourke Marston. Yet neither Mr. Swinburne nor anyone else has given us lines more pathetically apt than those in one of the poems in this "Last Harvest"—

Go, songs of mine
The music of an exquisite despair.

Review: By J. W. Hales

(December 17, 1881.)

Errors in the Use of English. By the late WILLIAM B. HODGSON, LL.D. (David Douglas, Edinburgh.)

THIS posthumous work of Dr. Hodgson deserves a hearty welcome, for it is sure to do good service for the object it has in view—improved accuracy in the use of the English language. The materials of the volume, as we learn from the pages headed "Introductory"—a somewhat absolute use of an adjective—"were selected from his notes of many years' extensive and varied reading, and they were arranged for publication in their present form before his death."

The book can scarcely be regarded as a systematic treatise on inaccuracy. It is rather a well-ordered and happily chosen collection of examples. And perhaps its chief use will be in very distinctly proving with what wonderful carelessness or incompetency the English language is generally written. For the examples of error here brought together are not picked from obscure or inferior writings. Among the grammatical sinners whose trespasses are here recorded appear many of our best-known authors and publications. As one turns over the pages, one finds appended to sentences quoted to illustrate some error or another the names of Thackeray, the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Quarterly*, the *Saturday*, Mrs. Gaskell, Shelley, the *Spectator*, Mr. Matthew Arnold, Southey, and many another of more or less note—often, no doubt, of less, but surprisingly often of more. The chief nurseries and homes, so to speak, of slipshod English are the daily papers. Many journalists, it would seem, have not time, if they have the ability, to be accurate; they are like the youthful *examiné* who wrote very lengthy papers, but was too hurried, he said, to spell properly. Perhaps it is in the advertisements of newspapers that the highest triumphs of bad English

are achieved. Dr. Hodgson, man of humour as he was, was not likely to overlook these performances. He gives some amusing specimens. We may remark, by-the-way, that his volume is often as amusing as it is instructive. He quotes, for instance, an "advertisement" that speaks of "a piano for sale by a lady about to cross the Channel in an oak case with carved legs." The supply of such things does not seem likely to fail at present at least, however accurately dull posterity may be. We saw last week an advertisement from a young man in the brewing line who was anxious for a new situation. The worthy fellow, wishing to show that he was well up in his business, and had enjoyed the advantage of serving in a good "house," described himself as having been "articled and brewed at the firm"—of XXX, let us say. A "brewed" young man! And yet, such are the perplexities of language, our advertising friend, if he could think about the matter, might say: "You talk of drinking beer, and of a drunken man—that is, I suppose, one who has drunk beer or some liquor or another; why not then of brewing beer and of a brewed man—that is, one who has brewed beer?" It is certain most people would be at a loss how to answer this ingenious person if he defended himself so. All that could be said would be that our usage, "*Magistra loquela consuetudo*," does not allow that use of "brewed," whatever sound analogies might be found for it. We saw also in an "advertisement" a week or two ago some young woman described as "the greatest delineator of natatorial science." Clearly enough, there is not likely to be any dearth in our newspapers of English bad in one way or another. But the special feature of Dr. Hodgson's book is that his illustrations are not flowers of journalism or the choice fruits of "our advertising columns," but are drawn from writers of name and fame.

We say that this book of Dr. Hodgson's proves that English is mostly written with astounding inaccuracy. As to spoken English, everybody knows how slovenly and blunderful that is, what masterpieces of grammatical impropriety and confusion most public speeches are, how they abound in violated concords and outrageous constructions. But we flatter ourselves things are better with our language as written. And better, no doubt, they are; but this is consistent with their being very bad. We once heard an accomplished lady remark of a certain clergyman that she felt sure he must have taken a good degree at Oxford or Cambridge, because his English was so bad. And we believe there was some truth in this remark. It would be quite possible to show that many of the errors current in English are the errors of men who have studied Latin and Greek idioms with intelligence and ability, but have given no thought to those of their mother-tongue. They have taken it for granted that English needs no special consideration or research. Yet it may be submitted that English, too, has its difficulties and problems, which cannot be solved, or attempted to be solved, without special application and special scholarship.

Dr. Hodgson's book is, of course, not exhaustive—that would be impossible. Nor is it always free from

error when it points out error—that could scarcely be expected. Thus he says, "Our Father *which* art in heaven" was contrary to Wickliffe's usage ('Oure fadir *that* art,' etc.), and it is contrary to modern usage, too," etc. But, in fact, that use of *which* occurs in the Wickliffite translation, though it may not occur in the particular passage quoted; and it was certainly perfectly good Middle English. Thus we have "And if ye leenen to him of *whiche* ye hopen to tak again," etc. (Luke vi. 34); and in Gower, "Adrian *which* pope was." But, on the whole, both for fullness and for accuracy, the book merits high praise, as also for its judicial tone and its suggestiveness.

Many of the points discussed are, indeed, yet unsettled questions—e.g., the word *talented*. We confess to thinking that those who oppose this word have the worst of it in point of theory, and now also as respects usage. We hold with Dr. Fitzedward Hall that it is of thoroughly English formation. Many people, even of those who would set the world right about such matters, do not seem to know that "-ed" is an adjectival suffix as well as the participial. Those who object to it on the score that it must be formed from *talent* and not from *talents* forget that we speak of a "man of talent," using talent in a sort of collective sense; and that, exactly similarly, we speak of "a high-principled man" and a "man of high principle." Surely the word ought to be allowed to take its seat in the house, so to say, without further opposition.

A Villanelle: By W. W. Skeat

(May 19, 1888.)

(How to compose a *villanelle*, which is said to require "an elaborate amount of care in production, which those who read only would hardly suspect existed.")

It's all a trick, quite easy when you know it,
As easy as reciting A B C;
You need not be an atom of a poet.

If you've a grain of wit, and want to show it,
Writing a *villanelle*—take this from me—
It's all a trick, quite easy when you know it.

You start a pair of rimes, and then you "go it"
With rapid-running pen and fancy free;
You need not be an atom of a poet.

Take any thought, write round it or below it,
Above or near it, as it liketh thee;
It's all a trick, quite easy when you know it.

Pursue your task, till, like a shrub, you grow it,
Up to the standard size it ought to be;
You need not be an atom of a poet.

Clear it of weeds, and water it, and hoe it,
Then watch it blossom with triumphant glee.
It's all a trick, quite easy when you know it;
You need not be an atom of a poet.

By A. C. Swinburne

(September 27, 1884.)

On the Bicentenary of Corneille, celebrated under the Presidency of Victor Hugo.

SCARCE two hundred years are gone, and the world is
past away
As a noise of brawling wind, as a flash of breaking
foam,
That beheld the singer born who raised up the dead
of Rome;
And a mightier now than he bids him too rise up to-day.
All the dim great age is dust, and its king is tombless
clay,
But its loftier laurel green as in living eyes it clomb,
And his memory whom it crowned hath his people's
heart for home,
And the shade across it falls of a lordlier-flowering
bay.

Stately shapes about the tomb of their mighty maker
pace,
Hheads of high-plumed Spaniards shine, souls revive of
Roman race,
Sound of arms and words of wail through the glowing
darkness rise,
Speech of hearts heroic rings forth of lips that know
not breath,
And the light of thoughts august fills the pride of
kindling eyes,
Whence of yore the spell of song drove the shadow
of darkling death.

The Sonnet: By John Addington Symonds

(February 13, 1886.)

Sonnets of this Century. By WILLIAM SHARP. (Walter Scott.)

AMONG the numerous anthologies of sonnets which have recently appeared, this deserves, and will probably obtain, a place of prominence. Mr. Hall Caine's "Sonnets of Three Centuries" was a selection from the whole range of English literature. Mr. Waddington's two volumes were devoted severally to sonnets by living and dead authors. Mr. Sharp limits himself to the work of all and any who had lived or are living in this century. From W. L. Bowles, the inspirer of Coleridge in his youth, to Mr. Ernest Rhys, the latest comer into this field of fame, a long series of years have to be reckoned. The period has been one of intense intellectual activity and of complicated literary evolution. When we read the names of the 109 rhymesters who are represented in "Sonnets of this Century," we are astounded by their variety. The list includes a cardinal, an archbishop, a dean, a canon, a prime minister, a lord chancellor, five peers, several baronets, an astronomer royal, two eminent painters,

the greatest living novelist, a governor-general of India, and a group of distinguished women. It is clear that the critic need no longer be warned in England not to "scorn the sonnet." We may rather say that since the Rev. W. L. Bowles published his inoffensive little volume in 1789, a passion for this species of verse has invaded all classes of society. On the causes of its ever-increasing popularity I shall, perhaps, touch in this review; but at present I must call attention to the distinctive features of Mr. Sharp's selection.

The editor has gone far afield, sparing neither time nor labour in studying, discovering, and comparing sonnets which may be counted by hundreds. He has composed a suggestive treatise on the history, structure, artistic capacity, and various species of this poem. Short biographical notices of all the writers included in this volume have been written, those which deal with living persons being marked by a happy mixture of frankness and sympathy. Right instinct has led him to classify his authors in alphabetical order, so that the specimens chosen from each may be surveyed together. Working thus, Mr. Sharp has produced a sonnet-book which represents the best craftsmanship of the nineteenth century, and supplies the public with an interesting guide to the technicalities of the subject. In one important respect I am bound to qualify this hearty welcome with some words of censure. The book is inaccurately printed, clerical and typographical errors occurring frequently, sometimes to the serious damage of a sonnet's sound or sense. The promise of a reprint in large quarto form makes it worth while to put both publisher and editor upon their guard, and to recommend a scrupulous revision of each page.

In his introduction Mr. Sharp raises questions of much difficulty regarding the origin of the sonnet. So far as I am aware, this form cannot be traced to Provençal literature; and the theory that it was constructed in imitation of the Greek epigram is palpably absurd. We all know that even Petrarch, the inaugurator of modern scholarship, could not read Greek; and Petrarch found the sonnet perfected before he used it. Still more ridiculous is the attempt to derive it from a French source. We may fairly assume that it was indigenous to Italy, and probably to the cradle of Italian poetry in the Sicilian court of Frederick II. With regard to this point, Mr. Sharp makes some observations which seem to show imperfect acquaintance with early Italian literature. He hazards the opinion that the seed of the sonnet was sown in the eleventh century, that it "sent up a green shoot here and there" in the twelfth, and that in the thirteenth it was "in fulfilled bud." The one thing which is fairly ascertained at present is that there was no Italian literature before the thirteenth century. When Frederick II died in 1250, that literature had been started; when Fra Guittone—whom Mr. Sharp calls the Columbus of the sonnet—died in 1298, this species of poem had been brought to a high degree of cultivation. According, therefore, to our present knowledge, we must ascribe the birth and growth of the sonnet to the thirteenth century. . . .

A quatrain as a unit of the base, a tercet or a couplet as the unit of the turn, in a stanza of fourteen lines, will be found to constitute the fundamental integers of every sonnet, in whatever language or however these elementary parts shall have been variously put together. Experiments in which the broad correlation of base to turn is neglected do not propagate their species, however admirable they may be as poems of fourteen irregularly rhyming verses. On the other hand, numerous subdivisions of the two authentic sonnet types, Petrarchan and Shaksperian, have been cultivated. These are exhaustively tabulated in his introduction by Mr. Sharp, and all are worthy of acceptance. Where both base and turn are definitely discernible, the sonnet is legitimate, whether it be constructed on exact Petrarchan or Shaksperian principles, or upon that hybrid between both, which uses the Italian rhyme system and yet clinches with a couplet. The striking metaphorical symbol drawn by Mr. Theodore Watts from the observation of the swelling and declining wave can even, in some examples, be applied to sonnets on the Shaksperian model, for, as a wave may fall gradually or abruptly, so the sonnet may sink with stately volume or with precipitate subsidence to its close. Rossetti furnishes incomparable examples of the former and more desirable conclusion; Sydney Dobell, in the book under our consideration (p. 66), yields an extreme specimen of the latter. It is a merit, in my opinion, of Mr. Sharp's anthology that he has been catholic in his reception of all sonnets which to any appreciable extent exhibit this phenomenon of swell and subsidence in two marked members of the stanza.

Some very singular reflections upon the laws of sonnet-production are suggested by this book. At first sight, we are astonished that the greatest poets compete so poorly with lesser writers in a form so difficult to handle. Why Tennyson should write below his ordinary level in the sonnet-form is, indeed, noticeable, when we regard his distinguished capacity as a metrical artist. Why Shelley and Browning do not shine is easier to comprehend. In Shelley's days the sonnet was not well understood; and it is certainly not the lyrical medium which Shelley thought it. As regards Browning, the sonnet, unless avowedly burlesque, does not lead its structure to trenchant pungencies of phrase and startling freaks of argument. Knowing, as we now do, what stability there is in the stanza itself, we are better able to perceive why the second-rate succeed moderately than why the first-rate fail conspicuously. To a certain extent, the form itself secures success, when faithfully observed and conscientiously maintained, lifting writers of the second or third rank to excellence by the concentration it demands, and by the suggestive exigence of intricate rhyme structure. Men like Blanco White, Lord Hanmer, Leigh Hunt, Hartley Coleridge, to mention only four names from the dead, have written monumental sonnets. Men like Spenser, Coleridge, Gray, Shelley, Byron, have fallen in this line below their average. Yet, moving still within the region of the dead, we must remember that Keats produced fine work,

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Wordsworth some of his best work, and Rossetti his most permanent work, in this little field; and all three were poets of the first order. The same singularity is observable in Italian literature. Upon the wings of the sonnet La Casa soars and Ariosto droops. Boccaccio and Petrarch are at their best here, while Tasso only passes muster. But Dante, the very greatest, shows his godlike strength no less in the sonnet than in the *canzone* and in *terza rima*. It seems, then, that for sonnet production a quality is wanted, which may be denied by nature to the monarchs of song, but which may be possessed by the plain aristocracy of talent, and may in some felicitous instances be granted as a secondary crown to the imperial bards—Dante and Shakespeare, for example—in addition to their supereminence of dominion over epical, lyrical, and dramatic realms.

These reflections make it easy to understand why the sonnet has recently attracted so many men of taste who aspire to the poetic laurel. There is no undue artificiality in a sonnet as a vehicle of expression. Adequate thought or emotion, once carefully enshrined in metrical form so complex, acquires independent being. Writing a sonnet is thus the same as giving organic body to a fragmentary soul, which would else be imperceptible to sense and without duration in this world. But the very artificiality of the vehicle, the fixity of the stanza, renders it a source of strength to those who are not in a high sense creative. Forced to mould unshaped matter of the mind into individual star form, the men of whom I speak would fail. But when they have mastered the conditions of the sonnet they can pour into that deftly fashioned vase a liquid thought or feeling which shall afford refreshment to many generations. Such singers do not demand the elbow-room of infinity. Most of the greatest require it. Therefore the sonnet's narrow plot is an advantage for the former, an irksome limitation for the latter. It is a principal merit of such anthologies as Mr. Sharp's that they secure an audience for poets of a genuine but minor quality throughout the far future. After some such fashion as this, I imagine, the Greek anthology was gradually put together. And who would not be glad to survive after two thousand years in a single epigram or sonnet? Soul thrills soul by tiny sparkles of semi-lyric fire, if less intensely, not less truly, than by Sophoclean dramas or Pindaric odes.

W. E. Henley on "The Egoist."

(November 22, 1879.)

The Egoist: A Comedy in Chapters. By GEORGE MEREDITH. 3 vols. (C. Kegan Paul and Co.)

IN "The Egoist" the author of "Harry Richmond" and "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel" has produced a piece of literature unique of its kind. He has nothing to learn of comedy in the abstract; he proved that long ago in the brilliant fragment on the comic spirit and its uses read by him at the Royal Institution. But it

is a far cry from a proper understanding of comedy to an artistic exemplification of its function and capacities, and they are very few who have attempted the journey with success. Mr. Meredith is indisputably of their number. His book is fairly described as a Comedy in Chapters, for it has the same intention and the same relation to actuality and human life as the master-works of Molière. It is an epitome in narrative of a certain well-thumbed chapter in the great Book of Egoism—the chapter treating of the egoist in love, the egoist as he appears and is in his relations with woman; and in the figure of its hero, Sir Willoughby Patterne, Mr. Meredith has summed up enough of human nature to make it typical and heroic. Of course, Sir Willoughby's story is as conventionally told as Alceste's own. Its personages are not human beings, but compendiums of humanity; their language is not that of life and society pure and simple, but that of life and society as seen and heard through the medium of comedy; the atmosphere they breathe is as artificially rare as that of Orgon's parlour. To live with them you must leave the world behind, and content yourself with essences and abstractions instead of substances and concrete things; and you must forget that such vulgar methods as realism and naturalism ever were. Thus prepared, you will find "The Egoist," as far as its matter is concerned, a veritable guide to self-knowledge and a treatise on the species of wonderful value and comprehensiveness. As to its manner, that is a very different thing. I can well believe that there are many who will read "The Egoist" with impatience and regret, and many more who will not read it at all. To prepare oneself for its consideration with the "Imposteur" and "L'Ecole des Femmes" is a mistake. Mr. Meredith's style, it seems to me, has always been his weak point. Like Shakspeare, he is a man of genius who is a clever man as well; and he seems to prefer his cleverness to his genius. It is not enough for him to write a book that is merely great; his book must also be brilliant and personal, or it is no book to him. It may be that in "The Egoist" his reckless individuality is less ill seen than in "Beauchamp" or "Emilia"; it may be that, as the inventor of a literary *genre*, he may insist on being criticised according to his own canons. Certain it is that in his Comedy in Chapters he has asserted himself more vigorously, if that were possible, than in any other of his works. It is a wilful hurly-burly of wit, wisdom, fancy, freakishness, irony, analysis, humour, and affectation; and you catch yourself wishing, as you might over Shakspeare, that Mr. Meredith were merely a great artist, and not so diabolically ingenious and sympathetic and well-informed and intellectual as he is. Speaking for myself, I have read "The Egoist" with great and ever-increasing interest and admiration. To me it is certainly one of the ablest books of modern years. It is full of passion and insight, of wit and force, of truth and eloquence and nature. Its characters, from Sir Willoughby downwards, are brilliantly right and sound; it has throughout the perfect good breeding of high

comedy; there is not a sentence in it, whether of dialogue or analysis or reflection, but is in some sort matter for applause. All the same, I cannot but believe that its peculiarities of form are such as must stand inevitably in the way of its success. I cannot but believe that, with all its astonishing merits, it will present itself to its warmest admirers as a failure in art, as art has hitherto been understood and practised. Mr. Meredith has written for himself, and it is odds but the multitude will decline to listen to him. Nor, so far as I can see, is the multitude alone to blame.

Review: By James Ashcroft Noble

(February 28, 1885.)

Diana of the Crossways. By GEORGE MEREDITH. In 3 vols. (Chapman and Hall.)

IN saying that the books of Mr. George Meredith appeal exclusively to a cultivated taste, we use the epithet "cultivated" as synonymous with the two epithets, "educated" and "acquired." In fiction, as in wine, the popular preference is for body rather than bouquet; and Mr. Meredith's work is almost perversely deficient in body, owing all its charm to a very delicate, but also very recognisable, literary flavour, which, if discerned at all by the untutored palate, is hardly likely to be enjoyed. Nor would we say that enjoyment must necessarily follow upon discernment. The peculiar quality of Mr. Meredith's writing is very charming; but its charm is not that which we find in fiction. The taste of the ordinary novel-reader may be somewhat coarse; but his demand for something a little more substantial than the items in Mr. Meredith's bill of fare is not unreasonable. The author of "*Diana of the Crossways*" has always seemed to us not so much a novel-writer as a singularly brilliant social essayist, who has wilfully chosen to cut up his essays into fragments of fictitious description and conversation. His books are always interesting, and yet, paradoxical as the saying may seem, we are interested neither in the personages themselves nor in what happens to them. We read simply that we may know what Mr. Meredith has to say, and that we may enjoy his manner of saying it; but the people and the events may be said to be in the way rather than otherwise, being at the best only concrete illustrations, like the men and women with the latinised names who figure in George Eliot's "*Impressions of Theophrastus Such*." There is nothing better in "*Diana of the Crossways*" than the almost dazzlingly brilliant introductory chapter, "*Of Diaries and Diarists touching the Heroine*," which will be perused at least twice by every reader—once when he begins the story and again when he has finished it; and here Mr. Meredith is what we contend he ought always to be, an essayist undisguised in the fancy dress of a novel-writer. It is full of good things such as this, of romance—"The young who avoid that region escape the title of fool

at the cost of a celestial crown"; or this of oratory—"It is always the more impressive for the spice of temper which renders it untrustworthy"; or a score of others that it would be pleasant to quote did space allow. These things in the essay are enjoyable; but a conversation conducted in epigrams is not enjoyable, because it brings with it a sense of strain and distortion. The situations in the book are not inevitable. They have no imaginative necessity, but only an intellectual necessity. They are simply pegs on which to hang clever comments. We do not, we cannot, really care for Diana Warwick and her various entanglements with her lovers and would-be lovers; but it is interesting to see what Mr. Meredith can make of them. Once, indeed, Diana does become vividly human—in the scene where Percy Dacier casts her off because she has betrayed his great political secret to the London editor; but the chapter comes as a surprise that does not recur, the only equally human and realisable passage being the description, which is almost painfully powerful, of Sir Lukin Dunstane's remorseful agony when his wife, to whom he has not been too faithful, is undergoing the operation which may deprive him of her for ever. We do not believe, however, that Mr. Meredith's admirers will feel that in "*Diana of the Crossways*" he falls below himself.

The Humours of Examinations

(September 29, 1900.)

THE humours of examinations never pall, and we welcome a fresh batch, which Mr. E. M. Griffiths sends to the October *Longman's* under the title "*A Study in School Jokes*." First, there are mistakes in spelling, multitudinous, and as a rule uninteresting, but yielding such treasures as:—

The blood in the body is taken by means of tubs to the heart and there detained.

Stored in some trouser-house of mighty kings.

I came sore and conquered.

The second class is labelled "unsuccessful guessing." It gives us some amusing definitions:—

Insulators are: 1. "Islanders." 2. "Machines used to freeze cream and other liquids to make ice." 3. "People who insult other people."

A buffer is: 1. "A thing that buffs." 2. "A hard blow." 3. "A wild animal." 4. "A kind of ox used to plough the fields in some countries."

And the following:—

A watershed is a thing that when the soil in part of a river stands straight up on one side and slants tremendously the other side, the water is obliged to go up the soil on one side and come slanting down the other side—that is what they call a watershed.

About this time the Pope turned the bull out of the church.

Roman citizenship was a ship on which the Romans went out fishing free of charge.

The Revival of Learning. Colet came into France and was much surprised to see how the people were all raving on learning; they wanted to learn Greek, so that they could read some more about the ancient Britons.

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